BRITISH COLUMBIA

Speech from the Throne

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The Honourable Iona Campagnolo

Lieutenant-Governor

at the

Opening of the First Session,

Thirty-Eighth Parliament

of the

Province of British Columbia

September 12, 2005

As this parliament begins it is right for us to remember the contributions of fellow citizens who have passed away since parliament last sat.

We have lost those who took public service into the political realm: Robert Bonner, who was our longest-serving Attorney General, former members of this assembly Jeremy Dalton and Larry Guno, and Member of Parliament Chuck Cadman.

We join our friends in First Nations in mourning their loss of leaders: Grand Chief Archie Jack of the Penticton Indian Band, and George Watts of the Nuu-chah-nulth Tribal Council.

We share the sense of loss felt by everyone touched by Sister Mary Alice Danaher's life-long work making post-secondary education accessible to the First Nations people of Canim Lake with exceptionally positive results.

We mourn the passing of Lilian To, whose extraordinary and dynamic efforts made life better for people who came from across the globe to make a new life in British Columbia.

In this the Year of the Veteran, we were reminded of the great sacrifices made by earlier generations when we lost Ernest (Smokey) Smith, Canada's last surviving recipient of the Victoria Cross for his bravery in the Second World War.

On my way to this chamber, I offered a wreath of remembrance from us all at Victoria's Cenotaph in salute to all those whose service to our society insures

the continuance of the parliamentary democracy that we celebrate here this afternoon.

In recent weeks, the hearts and prayers of all British Columbians have gone out to the victims of hurricane Katrina in the U.S. Gulf Coast, especially those still struggling in and around New Orleans.

We can all take pride in the compassion of the countless British Columbians who stepped forward to help, including the members of Vancouver's Urban Search and Rescue Team who did an exemplary job rescuing more than 100 hurricane victims in St. Bernard Parish, Louisiana.

Your government has pledged its continued support for the people of Alabama, Louisiana, and Mississippi as they begin the long process of recovery and rebuilding. Their suffering is a sobering reminder to all of us of the awesome power of nature and of the need to constantly prepare for the unexpected, to protect and preserve the many blessings that we enjoy here in our province.

I am pleased to open the 38th Parliament of British Columbia and to congratulate all new and returning members on your electoral success.

On behalf of your government, I wish to thank everyone who participated in the recent provincial election.

From the many thousands of volunteers who supported the 412 candidates who ran for office across B.C., to everyone who worked on the election in our 79 electoral districts, to the more than 1.76 million registered voters who cast a ballot — you all deserve our gratitude.

Your involvement reminds us all how fortunate we are to live in one of the world's most peaceful and prosperous parliamentary democracies.

Once again, the people have freely elected their representatives to form a responsible government that is accountable to them through this Legislative Assembly.

It is an achievement and honour for which all members and their families should be especially proud.

You are 79 of only 854 MLAs to have ever been chosen to serve in this Legislature since our first provincial election in 1871.

The task before you now, as it was for your predecessors, is of vital importance and consequence.

It is the chance to build upon the legacy of achievement that has marked our province from its inception, to help all British Columbians realize their full potential.

It is the opportunity to reach for the full promise of British Columbia and to reinforce this province's reputation as the best place on Earth to raise a family, live, work, visit, and invest.

Your government wants to involve all members in that endeavour.

It congratulates the new Official Opposition and welcomes its stated desire to serve as a constructive force for positive change.

Today, British Columbians are confident in their future and buoyed by the cresting tide of opportunity that is lifting B.C. higher.

The people have given this government a new mandate to lead British Columbia forward and make real progress on its five great goals for the golden decade ahead.

They have elected a strong Opposition to help accomplish that task and to hold your government accountable for its actions.

All members of this legislature have an opportunity to elevate public confidence through a common commitment to constructive debate, marked by civility, dignity, and decorum.

That is a fitting goal for this new parliament as your government seeks to advance its election platform and commitments.

That platform document will serve as the central policy framework and work plan for the term ahead.

It is a long-term plan that looks beyond the next four years to set out five great goals for the next decade that were outlined in some detail in the last throne speech.

Briefly, those great goals are as follows:

1. To make B.C. the best educated, most literate jurisdiction on the continent.
2. To lead the way in North America in healthy living and physical fitness.

3. To build the best system of support in Canada for persons with disabilities, special needs, children at risk and seniors.

4. To lead the world in sustainable environmental management, with the best air and water quality, and the best fisheries management, bar none.

5. To create more jobs per capita than anywhere else in Canada.

These are far-reaching and long-term objectives.

They oblige your government to reach beyond the status quo in the delivery of health care, education, support services, environmental management, and economic development.

The government has established these key goals in response to the demands of today's world.

We can no longer let institutional inertia and the fear of change hold back our children.

Nowhere is that more true than with respect to education.

There is much more that can and will be done to improve education for students at all levels, as your government's platform suggests.

When we speak of life-long learning we must remember that from the moment a child enters the world they are learning.

Already major efforts have been launched to improve access to early childhood development.

Those efforts will be expanded.

B.C.'s children deserve the best, and every effort will be made to establish public education services that celebrate excellence in teaching and excellence in achievement.

In British Columbia, every child should know the joy of reading and revel in the discovery of new knowledge and the excitement of learning.

Your government intends to capitalize on new knowledge to give our children the best education possible.

The annual Teachers' Congress will create an exclusive forum for teachers to join with parents and school trustees and educators to examine approaches that focus on the needs of children as we pursue our goal.

Education will move beyond our schools into our communities.

Literacy programs will open new doors of opportunity to provide students of all ages the foundation skills in literacy and numeracy that are essential in today's world.

Your government will aggressively pursue new initiatives in trade and skills development in concert with our colleges and the private sector.

It will add new opportunity for skills development by building on the success that has seen a 30 per cent increase in apprenticeships in the last two years.

It will work with other provinces and the federal government to develop a new, pan-Canadian skills partnership aimed at maximizing educational opportunities for all citizens.

These are just some of the steps that will be taken to advance your government's great goal on education.

Others highlighted in the Real Leadership, Real Progress platform will be taken as well, to increase accountability, access, achievement, parental involvement, and student health.

As your government moves forward to improve access, choice, and quality in public education, it will likewise act to make real progress on the other great goals.

For example, your government has committed to building the best system of support in Canada for B.C.'s seniors.

Several steps will be announced to advance that great goal and build on initiatives already announced that are today benefiting seniors, children at risk, and persons with special needs and disabilities.

The five great goals are deliberately far-reaching objectives.

They aspire to put British Columbia at the top in education, health care, social support, environmental management, and job creation.

They are by definition comparative goals that will be important to be defined by clear and consistent measurements.

In the months to come, your government will invite the Official Opposition, the B.C. Progress Board, First Nations, and others to help identify the most appropriate targets, benchmarks, and indicators for measuring progress on each goal.

The five great goals cannot be achieved overnight, or even in one term.

They are goals to guide government's strategic focus for the next decade.

They will be as difficult to attain as they are worthy of aspiration.

Each goal is dependant on the others.

Meeting them will require unprecedented cross-ministry coordination and relentless resolve.

Several overarching strategies will be crucial to that enterprise.

Your government has already piloted successful innovative approaches in cross-ministry coordination.

These will be expanded to include a permanent policy secretariat to work on cross-government priorities that will report to participating ministries through a deputy ministers' committee.

The province-wide ActNowBC program will unite strategies in education, health, transportation, and the environment to meet your government's great goal on health.

Strategies recommended by advisory bodies, such as the Premier's Council on Aging and Seniors' Issues; the Task Force on Homelessness, Mental Illness and Addictions; the Premier's Technology Council; the B.C. Competition Council; and the Asia-Pacific Trade Council will all help advance the great goals.

The Asia-Pacific Gateway Initiative will play a crucial role in opening up every part of our province to new opportunities.

That initiative will include the establishment of an Asia-Pacific Museum of Trade and Culture to showcase our Pacific history and to tell our story to Canada and the world.

All of the great goals will be advanced by the 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games.

The Olympics offer a once-in-a-lifetime chance to showcase the best of B.C. to the world as we reach out to one another with common pride and purpose.

The Games will be a Canada-wide catalyst for excellence in athletics, a flourishing of artistic talent, and untold economic opportunity.

Meeting the five great goals will also demand a new emphasis on citizen-centred service delivery from government.

It will require a strong British Columbia to exercise strong national leadership on several fronts.

Your government is committed to strengthening our country by leading the way in pursuit of a national pharmacare strategy, and by developing national strategies for literacy, wait-time reductions, and skills training.

It is committed to leading a new national transportation strategy that will open up Canada's Asia-Pacific Gateway as never before.

As British Columbia leads in these endeavours, we will be crossing new ground.

Mistakes will be made. Learning from them and building on our successes will be essential to our achievement.

Leadership requires an ongoing commitment to social innovation in addressing the large societal challenges of our times.

Bold, new, collaborative steps are needed to tackle the social challenges of housing, addictions, mental illness, poverty, literacy and skills development, and community safety.

Fresh, creative actions are needed to cope with the societal challenges of fetal alcohol spectrum disorder, child protection, and women escaping abusive relationships.

British Columbia is leading the way in Canada with novel innovations in many of these areas.

Most involve partnerships with other levels of government and with private-sector organizations working shoulder-to-shoulder to make real progress.

Your government will build on that work with new measures this fall, including the establishment of a new Pacific Centre for Social Innovation.

The centre will serve to stimulate social innovation and the development of best practices reports from across the country and around the world.

It will engage governments, academics, and experts in various social disciplines to identify groundbreaking innovations now working in other jurisdictions to improve social outcomes and to successfully address contemporary socioeconomic challenges.

The centre will be asked to initially focus on three pressing social imperatives.

One is the question of what might be done to better serve the needs of today's families at home, in the modern workplace, and in our changing communities.

The recognition of these changes and a response to them will enhance the quality of life for all British Columbians.

The second priority will be to look at creative approaches being employed around the world to foster environmentally sustainable communities and other innovations to promote sustainable use of our natural resources.

In British Columbia, we are already recognized for the quality of our cities and towns.

As our population grows, we must find ways to maintain and improve air and water quality and maintain our natural landscapes for future generations.

The third focus of the Pacific Centre for Social Innovation will be the issue of how to improve voter participation in elections.

Voting is the most fundamental act of citizenship and it is on the wane.

We must search for the mechanisms of revitalization. The health of our public life depends on it.

None of the goals that have been laid out will be accomplished unless all British Columbians share in our achievements and success.

The government will work tirelessly to establish a new relationship with First Nations.

Allied with First Nation and aboriginal leadership, it will build upon and hopefully assist the work that aboriginal leaders are leading with provincial and territorial governments across Canada.

Innovative strategies are required to reverse the trends that have left too many aboriginal people behind in education, health, and economic opportunity.

There have been huge institutional and systemic impediments to progress in aboriginal communities.

We need to better understand those impediments and act with aboriginal leaders to overcome them.

Rampant poverty, inadequate housing, chronic unemployment, and notoriously low high-school completion rates are measures of our collective failure.

They should not be the fate of First Nations.

High suicide rates, lower life expectancy, higher infant mortality, and intolerably high levels of substance abuse should not be the plight of Canada's aboriginal peoples and cannot be allowed to continue.

Portable, accessible, universal, comprehensive, publicly-administered health care should not be just words in the Canada Health Act that apply to Canadians who live off-reserve.

They should be principles that apply equally to aboriginal people and all citizens, in rural communities and urban communities alike.

Your government will also continue to press this point as a national imperative for a stronger Canada.

Later this fall, First Ministers will meet with aboriginal leaders to act on a 10-year vision and plans for First Nations, Inuit, and Métis communities.

The goal will be to eliminate, within 10 years, the inequities that have plagued First Nations and aboriginal people throughout Canada's history.

Your government is committed to forging a new relationship of reconciliation with First Nations in British Columbia and to working with First Nations and aboriginal leaders across Canada to accomplish this ambitious goal.

This new relationship with First Nations will help define Canada and will shape our country's future.

The new relationship must be based on mutual respect and recognition of Aboriginal Canadians' constitutional rights.

It must recognize the Crown's legal and moral duty to consult where decisions impact constitutionally protected aboriginal rights and title.

It will require all governments to build capacity that will enable aboriginal people to fully participate in the multiple bounties of British Columbia.

The path to prosperity does not lie in the denial of aboriginal rights or in the discredited approaches of the past.

The way forward is not to be found through confrontation or endless litigation that has held us back as a people and a province.

The future we all seek for our families and communities will not be won through the uncertain path of denial, resistance, and short-sightedness.

It is ours to claim together through a new relationship that is honourable, constructive, and grounded in immediate and practical progress for all British Columbians.

Your government will push to extend that vision from coast to coast to coast.

It will seek to build a new national relationship of reconciliation that brings First Ministers together with aboriginal leaders as never before.

For too long, Canadian federalism has been viewed through the narrow prism of the "two solitudes" that speak to its French and English duality.

The story of Canada has largely been how those two distinct cultures have existed and thrived together.

It is the story of how they have embraced many other cultures in building a nation that is a model of diversity, tolerance, and human generosity.

Yet there remains a "third solitude" in our nation's midst, one that has been largely ignored and discounted by governments throughout our history.

It is the solitude known by Canada's founding nations — the First Nations — who even today struggle for recognition as full partners in Confederation.

Your government believes that Canada's greatest duty and hope for the future is to reach out to First Nations and aboriginal people to forge a new relationship.

Aboriginal people are not peripheral to the Canadian fabric — they are part of every fiber woven in the tapestry of Canada's history.

British Columbians are making great progress and their province is again a national leader.

There is newfound optimism and confidence throughout the province.

British Columbia's fiscal house is in order and our income tax rates are competitive. We are leading the nation in job creation and economic growth.

Families are keeping more of their paycheques and are feeling optimistic again.

Jobs and economic growth are providing the foundations for strengthening our public health, education, and social support systems.

Your government will continue to pursue B.C.'s economic advantages and to extend the current economic recovery to all families and all regions.

To secure a future for all our children, it will ensure that government does not fall back to the spendthrift ways of the past.

The burdens we have laid on the next generation must continue to be lightened through wise investment, continuing containment of the costs of government, and an acknowledgement that we cannot put off today's problems because they are inconvenient to deal with.

We must use the power of all we have learned to provide the next generation of British Columbians with the full range of opportunity.

Many challenges remain.

Managing debt, controlling cost pressures, and meeting the mounting demand for new and better services within available budgets are never easy imperatives to meet.

On Wednesday, the Minister of Finance will address those challenges in her Budget Update.

Indeed, the need to gain legislative approval for that spending plan is why this house is meeting earlier than scheduled.

In addition to the estimates, your government will introduce other legislation this session to honour previous commitments.

It will act to establish the Southern Interior Development Initiative and the North Island-Coast Development Initiative, and to further invest in the Northern Development Initiative.

Together, these three independently run regional development initiatives will invest, manage, and leverage some $300 million in provincial funding for the benefit of regional economies.

The goal is that regional actions to meet regional challenges will complement the government's endeavours to create a broad prosperity for all people in every region of the province.

Regional Development Boards will use this $300 million in seed capital to create new jobs and opportunities, free of provincial interference.

While our province strives to diversify its economy, we must never forget the traditional natural resources that create the foundation of our mutual prosperity.

Urban and rural families across British Columbia depend on those resources for their prosperity.

No single resource has contributed more to all of us than our forests.

Yet today, our forests are under an unparalleled attack from the mountain pine beetle.

That attack is more damaging than anything we have faced before and its effects will be felt for many generations to come.

Without unprecedented national action to thwart, contain, and recover from that epidemic, the pine beetle will cause even worse economic, environmental, and social damage.

The government's multi-pronged approach includes developing community partnerships, as well as two new separate partnerships with the Province of Alberta and the federal government.

New on-the-ground decision making, similar to an emergency response team, will be developed in the months ahead.

A 15-year partnership between the federal and provincial government is being pursued to provide:

- increased resources for economic diversification;

- improved silviculture to increase yields in immature but unaffected forest stands;
- immediate streamside, riverside, and fish habitat protection and improvements;
- increased reforestation and stream debris management programs;
- expanded science and research development into the best use of beetle-infested wood, and expanded product diversification; and,
- long-term land use opportunities with First Nations and other resource-dependent communities that have been directly impacted.

As your government pursues these initiatives, it will introduce other measures this session to help our province.

As promised, it will act to facilitate the creation of the new World Trade University in Chilliwack.

The WTU is a United Nations mechanism aimed at promoting education and commerce in global trade.

A Private Bill will be supported to formalize that exciting new institution.

Your government will bring forward the Civil Forfeiture Act that was tabled last April, as promised in its platform, to ensure that criminals do not profit from their crimes.

With a new parliament, it is timely to recall the purpose of scheduled fall sittings.

One reason was to give all members, their families, and the public greater certainty about the legislative schedule.

Another was to complete items introduced or announced in each previous spring session, and any other matters demanding the Legislature's urgent attention.

Consistent with that intent, and the added imperative this fall to debate and pass the Budget Estimates, the legislative agenda this session will not be onerous.

In future years, fall sittings will be convened as required, according to the set legislative calendar, to serve the purposes originally intended.

Your government will work with the Official Opposition to explore new ways of improving the Legislature's effectiveness for British Columbians.

It will build on British Columbia's growing reputation as a national leader in democratic reform with several reforms in representative and participatory democracy.

Your government wishes to acknowledge the input and support of the Official Opposition in advancing changes to improve and modernize the rules that guide the conduct of MLAs in this chamber.

Both parties have agreed that steps should be taken to give all members a stronger voice in this Legislature.

For the first time ever, a second Deputy Speaker of the House will be appointed from the ranks of the Official Opposition.

It has been 33 years since Question Period was introduced in this assembly.

In all that time, the 15-minute time block available for members' questions has never changed.

Your government will extend Question Period.

Question Period will be doubled from 15 minutes to 30 minutes.

Other reforms will be initiated to help private members better represent their constituents and enhance the effectiveness of our legislative committee system during estimates debates.

The number of daily two-minute Members' Statements will be doubled from three to six.

That will give private members more than twice the time and frequency to address issues of particular importance to them and their constituents each day.

Select standing committees will be activated with clear and compelling mandates.

The Health Committee will be asked to help advance the great goal on fitness and health, focusing specifically on the growing problem of childhood obesity.

The Education Committee will be asked to focus on the specific challenge of adult literacy in helping B.C. meet its goal of becoming the most literate jurisdiction in North America.

A Special Committee on Sustainable Aquaculture will be struck this session to advance B.C.'s great goal of leading the world in sustainable fisheries management.

It will be asked to work with the Pacific Salmon Forum and others to identify viable improvements to our fish farming industries that balance economic goals with environmental imperatives.

The government will invite the Official Opposition to chair that special committee and to also hold the majority of that committee's members.

This will address an important issue of vital interest to B.C.'s Island and coastal communities, who elected so many Opposition members to represent their interests.

Indeed, all of these reforms will give the Official Opposition an unprecedented role in this Legislature.

At the same time, your government will continue to lead the way in Canada on electoral reform.

British Columbia was the first province to establish set election dates.

Your government has considered the date set for the next election and has resolved that the next general election will be held as scheduled, four years from the last provincial election, on May 12th, 2009.

The issue of electoral reform remains following the results of the referendum put before the public in May.

Nearly 58 per cent of all citizens who cast a ballot in the recent referendum on electoral reform supported the proposed STV electoral system.

A solid majority supported STV in all but two of B.C.'s 79 constituencies.

And yet that was not enough to pass, according to the rules this Legislature unanimously established.

Your government has been clear that it does not intend to rewrite those rules after the fact, or pretend that the vote for STV succeeded when it did not.

Nor can it ignore the size of the double majority that voted to change our current electoral system to the STV model.

There have been many interpretations of the electoral reform referendum's result.

Whatever the analysis, a troubling question remains: why did so many people vote so strongly to change the current system?

The Citizens' Assembly considered the question of electoral reform for over a year.

They, too, concluded that our current system of electing MLAs was lacking and that a better system could be found in the single transferable vote model.

They came to that conclusion after intensive investigation, public consultation, and consideration of academic advice.

Your government does not accept that the solution to a majority vote that failed to pass is to essentially ignore it and impose yet another electoral system.

It does not accept that the answer to the minority's rejection of the Citizens' Assembly's proposal is to redo its work.

It does not accept that the 79 members of this assembly are any better qualified than the 161 members of the Citizens' Assembly were to choose the best electoral model.

In any event, your government believes that the widely acknowledged success of the Citizens' Assembly flowed directly from its independence from traditional political interference.

The Citizens' Assembly had no political master and no partisan axes to grind.

It was not a body of elected politicians who were perceived to be guided by self-interest.

It was exactly what this Legislature intended – citizen-centered, dedicated, and independent.

One task that was never assigned to the Citizens' Assembly was to show precisely how its proposed STV model might apply on an electoral map.

This was arguably a design flaw in its terms of reference that in retrospect may have impacted how people voted in the referendum.

Your government believes that establishing STV constituency boundaries may provide the public with a critical piece of information that was missing at the time of the referendum. The government will recommend that shortcoming be rectified.

The Legislature is obliged to appoint an Electoral Boundaries Commission this session.

Your government will use that opportunity to take the challenge of electoral reform to its ultimate conclusion.

Legislation will be introduced to enable that requirement.

The new Electoral Boundaries Commission will be given two tasks.

First, to redraft the provincial electoral map as is currently required.

The government will introduce an amendment that it hopes will protect northern representation in the Legislature.

The amendment will allow the commission to provide for up to 85 members under the current electoral system.

And having decided on the most appropriate number of MLAs within that cap to protect northern residents, it will set its sights on STV.

The commission will also be asked to identify the best and fairest way to configure British Columbia's electoral districts under the STV model.

In view of the double difficulty of this assignment and a new census not expected to be completed until 2007, the time frame for the commission to complete its work will be extended from the time prescribed in the current legislation.

The commission will be asked to submit its final report on electoral redistribution under both electoral systems by the spring of 2008.

That information will be put before the public as part of an extensive effort to better inform British Columbians about the two electoral options — the current system and STV.

Equal funding will be provided to support active information campaigns for supporters and detractors of each model.

The two models will be put to a province-wide vote, along with the applicable electoral boundaries, in a referendum that will be held in tandem with the November 2008 municipal elections.

That question will be crafted by the government and will be debated and voted upon in this Legislature.

All members, including cabinet ministers, will be free to speak to it and vote as they wish.

In establishing electoral boundaries, it has been the practice that all members are invited to make representations to the Electoral Boundaries Commission.

All members will be encouraged to also use that opportunity to comment on the relative merits of both electoral models under the boundaries proposed.

No one is obliged to support STV or remain silent if they have concerns.

The Premier will remain neutral, but all government members will be free to support or oppose either model.

In the final analysis, the people will again decide — not the politicians — which electoral model and boundaries suit them best.

The people will have their final say on STV.

The same rules and thresholds that applied for passing STV in the recent referendum will apply in the November 2008 referendum.

Whichever model succeeds is the model that will be employed to elect the next parliament, on May 12th, 2009.

The government intends to launch a province-wide enumeration prior to that date to ensure that the British Columbia voters list is both up to date and accurate.

In Conclusion:

British Columbia has always had a public life marked by adventure and by challenge.

But more importantly, it is a public life fueled by dreams and by the imagination of those who came before.

Although we cannot be proud of all that was done through this province's history, we can be proud of what has been accomplished.

Those accomplishments are not owned by governments.

They were shaped by the contributions of aboriginal people and immigrants from lands in every hemisphere, and fashioned by engineers and public servants, by doctors and teachers, by farmers and foresters and miners.

They are accomplishments created by people committed to a dream of making a better place for their families to live.

In two years, British Columbia will celebrate the 150th anniversary of the colony of British Columbia.

Our sesquicentennial will be a time for us to look back at the story of this place and of the people who live here.

It will be a time when each of us can search for a new understanding of the history that produced our present.

As we look at that past, read about it, and examine its meaning, we will find new strength to build a future that reflects the best we have to offer.

Today we celebrate the beginning of a new parliament and, with it, the chance to build upon that proud legacy, and bring out the best in our province.

May the excitement of today reflect itself in the work you do tomorrow, so that in the future people will look back on this time and say, "They saw their province, knew its greatness, and acted to make it a better place for all who would follow."